

The Acquisition of Vocabulary at the University Level

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In the teaching of language using grammar-translation long lists of new words were given to the students and they were expected to memorize them. With the advent of audio-lingual there was scant attention paid to the teaching of vocabulary. Recent trends in language teaching have produced new attitudes in the acquisition of vocabulary. This papers looks at some of these trends and attitudes as they apply to university level students in Japan.

Introduction

When working with many upper intermediate level and advanced level students, it is almost impossible not to notice in their speech that while they may use a good many grammatical structures with ease, they often seem to be stuck for the correct word. When asked what they consider to be their greatest weakness, many students at these upper levels will answer that they think their vocabularies are too limited. If one considers that average moderate readers can recognize about 50,000 words in their own language and that books in graded reading series for foreign language students usually stop about the 3,500 word level (Nuttall, 1982), it is possible to begin to see the problem that language students and language teachers face. This paper looks at six areas pertinent to vocabulary teaching -- sources of vocabulary, selection of vocabulary, materials, amount of vocabulary, organization of vocabulary, and some general techniques for teaching.

Sources of Vocabulary

One of the first things to look at when making decisions about teaching vocabulary is the source. Where do the words come from? There are many types of sources, but the two types of sources that we will look at here are -- 1) the textbook which the students are using for the course, and 2) supplementary materials from a variety of sources. We will examine each of these in turn.

Vocabulary from the Textbook

The textbook is, of course, the first place that we think of when we are asking about sources for vocabulary. Most textbooks contain a specific number of vocabulary items which are to be taught in such a way that they will become a part of the students' active vocabulary. In each lesson new words are given in the presentation section, and these are to be practiced in a variety of exercises which follow the presentation. These may include such exercises as question and answer drills or substitution drills. Teachers usually supplement the textbook exercises with ones that they have prepared for further practice. There are tests in the textbook at regular intervals which also measure the students' retention of and ability to use the newly taught vocabulary. Textbooks are an excellent source of graded vocabulary and provide a solid base for teachers to use in building up their students supply of words.

Vocabulary from Supplementary Materials

Many times teachers feel that, while the textbook they are using is adequate in most respects, it is sometimes lacking in others, and they seek to make up for this lack by using materials from outside sources. Material from outside sources contains vocabulary which is used by native speakers everyday in discussing or describing people, places or events. Many of these topics would not come up in the classroom under ordinary circumstances, and hence, much of the vocabulary would not

appear either. If these materials are carefully selected and carefully made into lesson materials, the students will have a challenging opportunity to enrich their vocabularies.

Selection of Vocabulary

If teachers confine themselves only to teaching from the textbook, there is very little to do in the nature of the selection of vocabulary. What is in the chapter along with what few related words are considered necessary by the individual teachers is what is taught. But suppose there is a need to go beyond the textbook. How can teachers decide what is best for all of their students? The first and most obvious reply is that vocabulary items should be useful, but just exactly how do we decide what "useful" is?

On a basic level there are very few decisions to be made. Both students and teachers recognize that there is a certain core vocabulary which must be mastered by the students in order for communication to take place. However, once that has been achieved, there are many other factors that enter the picture. In deciding on the criteria for usefulness, the factors of frequency, culture, necessity, and interest should be considered very carefully.

One of the first factors to be considered is frequency of use. It goes almost without saying that lexical items which appear often are, generally speaking, of more use to most students than ones which do not appear very often.

The second factor would be a cultural one. If a culture uses chopsticks for eating, then that is probably a useful word for the students who are in that culture or studying about that culture to learn. If chopsticks are not used, then students probably do not need to know the word (or at least not until a later stage). Eskimos have a great number of words for snow that the average person who does not live in Alaska will ever need to use. By the

same token, Alaskans do not have cockroaches and probably have little use for the word "bug-spray." So the cultural aspect should be one that is carefully considered.

A third factor to consider is necessity. If students are planning to use their English only for travel, then most of the vocabulary they need would probably be related to tourism. On the other hand, if students need to be able to read scientific or technical English for their work, they probably need to concentrate on the vocabulary related to their field. In this case, the content will decide what the vocabulary should be. Vocabulary items which are an essential part of a particular topic will be included even when these items have a very limited application outside the field.

A fourth factor is interest. It is only natural that students who are interested in a particular field or topic will consider the vocabulary items related to that field necessary. If students are interested in a particular subject, then they will probably want to know the vocabulary associated with the topic in order to be able to discuss it. The drawback here is, of course, in large classes (or even small ones) there are many different interests. Certainly, teachers should try to find topics that are of interest to students, but if they try to put student interest at the head of the list of criteria for judging usefulness, they run the risk of spending most of their time seeking some topics which students always agree on or at least agree to compromise on.

Materials

The way of dealing with the materials will differ from type to type. If textbooks are used, there is a somewhat standard format to follow. With authentic materials there is a wider approach.

Getting the most out of a Textbook

The units of many, if not most, textbooks are divided into a presentation section and an exercise section. One excellent way of increasing students' vocabularies is to pre-teach the new vocabulary presented in the unit. In the closing few minutes of the lesson, most teachers introduce the material for the following week. Students are often asked to share their knowledge of a particular topic in what are called schema building activities. At that time teachers could build vocabulary networks of both vocabulary known to the students and the new vocabulary. Teachers should then go over the specific new vocabulary with the students. By explaining the meanings of the new words and giving examples of how they are used, students will find it easier to understand the new material as they read it. Vocabulary exercises should be given as a regular part of every homework assignment. A time should be made in class for specific vocabulary practice. The homework vocabulary assignment could be gone over, and an additional classroom exercise could be included as well.

Using Outside Materials

The printed material that is perhaps the most readily available to teachers to be used as outside materials are articles that come from newspapers and magazines. Students in Japan especially are surrounded by a wide variety of publications in English. It seems only natural that they would want to be able to use them, and it seems only natural that teachers should want to use them extensively in the classroom. There are two major problems associated with the teaching of vocabulary when using authentic materials. One of these is the number of new vocabulary items in a single piece of writing, and the second is the number of synonyms the author has used in order to avoid redundancy.

How Much Vocabulary to Teach

In dealing with authentic material in the classroom, teachers need to decide which vocabulary items they will teach as active vocabulary and which they will teach as passive vocabulary. Certainly students have a right to expect that the meanings for all new words will be explained. However, teachers should make decisions about which words they need to deal with as active vocabulary items, which need a great deal of practice time, and which words they need to deal with as passive vocabulary items, which do not require practice time in class. It should be made clear to students which items are for active learning and which are for passive learning.

There are two factors to be considered in deciding the number of vocabulary items to be taught as active vocabulary. The first is how many new items should be included per lesson, and the second is how many items students should be required to learn over the entire semester. While there are no hard and fast rules for this, Gairns and Redman (1986) have suggested an average of eight to twelve new vocabulary items to be taught as productive vocabulary per 60-minute class period. University level classes in Japan usually meet once a week for an hour and an half for 12 weeks. If we say that students should be responsible for 18 to 20 new vocabulary items per lesson, this would give us an approximate figure of 225 items per semester or 450 per year. Since the average piece of authentic material has a great many new vocabulary items per paragraph and since the entire lesson cannot be spent on vocabulary practice alone, is easy to see that it would be unfair to ask that students be responsible for all the new words that they have encountered during a one-year period. At the beginning of each year teachers need to take a look at the vocabulary content of the material which they are going to use for the course and make

decisions at the beginning of the course regarding which vocabulary items they need to concentrate their attention on.

Memory and Organization

In a university level course vocabulary is often presented to students in the form of a written passage. The students read the passage looking up the words as they go along, and the teacher explains what they do not understand when they come to class. It is then the task of the students to remember what they have been taught. However, studies in the areas of reading and retention have indicated that a better understanding of memory and how we store items in memory will promote more efficient teaching methods and will enable the students to learn more quickly and to retain what they have learned more effectively (Mackay, Barkman, and Jordan, 1979). A full discussion of storage and retrieval in memory is beyond the scope of this paper, but the key to helping students achieve a higher retention rate seems to lie in the area of organization (Brown and McNeil, 1966). New vocabulary items should be organized in such a way that they are easy to put into memory and easy to retrieve later.

Once we have decided which vocabulary items will be taught, we need to decide how to organize their presentation. Having a clear system of organization will enable students to better understand and internalize the vocabulary that is being presented. There are several ways to organize the vocabulary. Words can be grouped together in semantic fields or as grammatical or phonological sets. Teachers need to consider which of the systems would be most appropriate for their particular classes.

Semantic fields

Semantic fields are made up of words that have semantic similarities. Semantic fields can be very broad such as "animals" or they can be more restricted such as "occupations." Semantic

fields can provide a useful base for students to expand and build on as they progress with their English. The groupings below illustrate several types of semantic fields.

Grouping by topic.

Grouping items that are related by topic is perhaps one of the most common systems. Many textbooks use "group together" words for articles of clothing, occupations, colors, and types of food. When working with outside materials, the topics for vocabulary grouping will probably be pertinent to the topic of the reading.

Grouping by activity.

Words related to different types of activities are often presented together. Phrases like "paying tuition," "buying books," and "getting an ID card," would be grouped together under the activity of registering for school. These kinds of groupings are very useful in long materials which cover more than one kind of activity such as "studying abroad."

Grouping by Similar Meaning.

Words that are similar in meaning such as "handsome," "attractive," "cute," and "nice looking" are often grouped together. These words are easily confused in meaning and need to be carefully explained. In outside readings there are many synonyms used in order to avoid redundancy. Words that have similar meanings should be grouped together for ease in remembering.

Grammatical or Phonological Sets

Just as some words have similar lexical meanings other words have similar grammatical functions. Many textbooks group these items together as a means of helping students learn them. In outside readings there are many phrases or expressions that can be grouped together in order to help students to remember.

Grouping by "Pairs"

Words which can be paired in some way are often grouped together. Adjectives with opposite meanings such as hot/cold, old/young or smart/stupid are often paired and taught as sets. Often in outside readings the opposite meaning is not in the reading itself, but could be included to make a "pair" as a memory aid.

Grouping two-word verbs

Verb-plus-preposition combinations with fixed meanings are often grouped together for ease in teaching. Words like "wake up," "put on," and "take off" are taught as a separate category of verbs as are irregular verbs. There are many of these which are used in outside readings, and teachers may even use a vocabulary grouping of these to review the grammar of two-word verbs.

Groupings by Degree

Adverbs of frequency such as "always", "often", "sometimes", "seldom" and "never" appear in textbooks frequently grouped together.

Some words, of course, do not really fit into any particular category, and these simply have to be dealt with on an individual basis. Also, the vocabulary in some lessons can seem to be hard to fit together. However, if we organize the vocabulary we are presenting into some kind of system, it will help the students to remember better.

General Teaching Suggestions

Once decisions have been made about which type of material to use, how many vocabulary items are to be taught, and how to group the items, teachers need to decide on specific teaching techniques. Recent trends in methodology have called for teachers to use tasks in the classroom that involve a high level of student activity. These activities lend authenticity to the lesson and encourage students to become more self-reliant in their

learning. Of course, how to proceed will often be influenced by the type of lesson or individual teacher preferences, but there are a few general steps that can be used to enhance student learning.

Pre-teaching Activities

There are a wide range of pre-teaching activities that can be used in the classroom depending on the type of material and the level of the students.

One of the easiest and perhaps the most used approaches is to give students a list of words taken from the new material and to discuss the meanings of the words with them. Students are first asked to define or to use the word in some way. Then, the teacher gives a complete (or complete as it applies to the new material) definition and examples of how it is used.

Another way that has been used very often is to show students pictures of people, places or events related to the material and have them talk about what they see in the pictures. As words that appear in the material are mentioned, the teacher writes them on the blackboard. Morgan and Rinvulcri (1987) suggest giving advanced level students an outline of the material and a list of vocabulary words that appear in the text. The students are asked to put the words in the outline in the order that they might appear.

Sometimes many of the words in a piece of text are unknown even to advanced level students. In this case a simplified version of the actual material could be prepared as a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Students could individually read the text and fill in the blanks with the words in their native language. Then, they could work together in pairs or small groups looking up words in their dictionaries. Their answers would then be compared to the words used in the text. In this way students are exposed to the words in the text as well as useful synonyms.

A wide variety of pre-teaching activities have been described in the literature about vocabulary teaching. Teachers should consider which would be the most likely to be suitable for their classes. Whichever activities are used the students will gain from them through greater understanding when they actually read the text.

Lesson Activities

During the teaching of the lesson there are a wide range of vocabulary teaching activities that can be used. Most teachers prefer to do the specific vocabulary practices first.

One of the quickest vocabulary practices to prepare is a multiple choice activity. The students are given the activity sheets and a set amount of time in which to do the activity. Then, the teacher and the students go over the activity together and decide on the correct answers.

Word building exercises for teaching the different forms of words (explode--verb; explosion--noun; explosive--adjective) as well as word association exercises for teaching synonyms are useful vocabulary teaching exercises which can be included in almost any type of lesson where time permits.

Practicing the new vocabulary is, of course, not limited to the beginning part of the lesson only. Practice on the new vocabulary should continue during the question and answer discussion sessions regarding comprehension of the material. Questions should be devised in such a way that students can respond using the target vocabulary. Students who cannot come up with the new vocabulary items can be prompted by the teacher.

While the whole class period cannot be devoted to vocabulary alone, it is possible to emphasize the new vocabulary and to encourage the students to practice the new vocabulary wherever possible without being obtrusive.

Dictionary Use

In recent years students have been encouraged to try to read and infer meaning or to guess the meaning of new words from the context without resorting to their dictionaries. This is certainly a necessary activity, especially for students who are required to do a lot of extensive reading. However, a dictionary is a useful tool and properly used can be an invaluable aid in the acquisition of new vocabulary. Students should be shown how to use their dictionaries effectively and with discretion.

Post-teaching Activities

In order to keep newly learned words active in the students vocabularies they should be used as often as possible. The best way would be to recycle the new vocabulary, and many of the better textbooks do attempt to do so. However, when the teacher is using outside material in the classroom, it is often to give students exposure to a wide variety of subjects. In this case, the new vocabulary is often difficult or even impossible to recycle. Under these conditions it is sometimes better to have students engage in some type of post-teaching activity outside class.

Students can make "usage dictionaries" with their new words. Students keep a notebook with their new words listed on separate pages. When they see examples of the the new words that they have learned in other contexts, they can copy the sentences into their notebooks.

Another way is to have students translate articles about similar topics from their native language into the target language. They should be encouraged to use as many of the new words as possible in their translations.

A third way is creative writing. Students should be encouraged to put their own ideas down on paper using the new vocabulary that they are learning. Having students apply the new vocabulary to themselves is probably the most meaningful

way of having them remember. If long papers are undesirable, students could be asked to keep a journal in which they comment on a variety of topics using as much of the new vocabulary as possible.

Conclusion

At the beginning levels of language learning students face a myriad of hurdles. They must acquire ability in all four of the major skill areas -- reading, writing, listening and speaking -- as well as a mastery of sub-skills -- basic syntax, pronunciation and basic vocabulary. However, as students reach the more advanced levels the hurdles become more concentrated in the area of vocabulary. The vocabulary that they need to know increases with their entry into every new subject that they wish to learn about in the target language. Students can be aided in their quest for learning by giving special attention to the sources of vocabulary, carefully selecting the vocabulary that is to be required, learning the techniques of working with the different types of materials, organizing the input, and by using teaching techniques that help to ease the difficulty in learning and to increase the rates of retention.

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大学生レベルでの語彙修得法について

ドナ・K・ストリップリング

従来の文法・和訳を使つての英語教授法においては、学生に対し新出語の長いリストが提示され、学生はそれを記憶することを要求されていた。しかし聴覚語学学習法の出現にともない語彙修得にあまり重点がおかれなくなってきた。語学教授法の最近の傾向は語彙修得に新しい取り組みをしている。この論文は、この新しいやり方を、日本の大学生に適応した場合の傾向とそのあり方について考察したものである。